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ABSTRACT

Although an important communication process, gossip rarely has been seriously studied. Distinct from rumor and self-disclosure, it can be defined as the communication process whereby information about another person's affairs or activities is disclosed and circulated in an exclusive manner in dyads. Some "functionalists" assert that gossip maintains social boundaries between in-group members and outsiders and reaffirms the norms and values of a particular communication network, while others claim gossip is a way to obtain information about another person and functions as a manipulative strategy to forward one's self-interest. "Transactionalists" propose it is used for impression management and for social comparison. The social exchange theory posits three functions of gossip, "informative," "moralizing," and "entertainment." Four rules can be advanced concerning the context, content, procedure, and structure of gossip in terms of the gossipers (A and B) and the "gossipee" (C): (1) when A and B gossip about C, C is not to be within listening distance; (2) what A shares with B about C is not public knowledge; (3) gossip is an entirely voluntary process; and (4) A and B are closer to each other than either is to C. Given these rules, it can be seen that gossip, or the art of "self-disclosure," seems to closely parallel self-disclosing communication. (JL)

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GOSSIP AS A COMMUNICATION CONSTRUCT

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GOSSIP AS A COMMUNICATION CONSTRUCT

INTRODUCTION

The purposes of this paper are to investigate the functions and rules of gossip and to induce a set of research questions for future communication research. Gossip, as a genre of informal communication, is often publicly scorned, yet privately practiced by a large proportion of the population. Close observation shows that gossip is a highly ritualized performance (Goffman, 1967), adhering to certain basic rules and conventions of dyadic communication. We all gossip artfully, yet effortlessly. We all seem to know intuitively when and where not to gossip, and when and where it is appropriate to gossip. In fact in our daily contact with people, few of us can escape the language of gossiping. We are either the one being gossiped about, or we find ourselves gossiping with others about another person. Gossip is an important communication process, yet gossip has rarely been the subject of serious study by human communication scholars.

Perhaps because of the negative connotation associated with phrases such as "idle chit-chat" or "lazy small talk," gossip is often viewed as a triviality. Except for a few articles in the Journal of Communication, Winter 1977, gossip

has belonged mainly to the domain of social anthropology. This paper will focus primarily on the rules for gossip in dyads rather than in groups. The rules will explore gossip as a communication construct, providing us with a general framework for what gossip is and leading us to a set of observations that need testing.

The term "gossip" derives from Old English as a contraction of the phrase "God + Sibb" meaning "the relation a family would have with someone they felt close enough to make into a god-parent for one of their children" (Rysman, 1977). It is only in the twentieth century that the idea of gossip has taken on the connotation of "small talk." More specifically, gossip is defined in this paper as "the communication process whereby information about another person's affairs or activities is disclosed and circulated in an exclusive manner in dyads." The difference between gossip and rumor is that: 1) In gossip, the information being disclosed is closely connected to the affairs or activities of a third person, while in rumor, the information disclosed may be on any issue or subject, from world politics and economics, to individuals with whom one may have no direct contact or involvement; 2) In addition, in gossip, the act of "disclosure" is the essence of the process, it is "disclosing" news about a third person whom both the gossipers know, and through the process of gossiping the news

is made available. In rumor, the process of "diffusion" is the key. Information is circulated freely through different channels; and 3) Finally, in gossip, the information being disclosed may or may not be factual, in rumor, information being diffused is unsubstantiated, without the basis of truth. Rumor is unauthenticated information (Rosnow, 1974).

Perhaps more important than the relationship between gossip and rumor, however, is the relationship of gossip and self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is defined here as "the private disclosure of information about the self to another person." Gossip, on the other hand, is "the disclosure of information between person A and person B about person C." In self-disclosure, information about the "self" is being disclosed; in gossip, it is information about a "third-person" that is disclosed. In self-disclosure, disclosing information about the self renders oneself vulnerable to another individual, offering the other the enormous power of "knowing," hence there is always a risk involved. Risk also exists in gossip when gossiper A confides in person B an exclusive piece of information about percon C. That is, there is always the risk that B might report back to C or pass the information on to D. Hence A has to search for the perfect balance point in which B is interested in the exclusive information about C, yet trustworthy enough not to transmit the information back to C. There is also the added risk that if A talks behind C's back, A may

also talk behind B's back. If amount of self-disclosure is viewed as an index of the depth of an interpersonal relationship, the amount of gossip, or "third-disclosure" can be viewed as an index of communicative shallowness. The links between gossip and self-disclosure will be considered more fully after examining the functions and rules of gossip.

FUNCTIONS OF GOSSIP

Understanding the various functions of gossip provides a sharper awareness of the rituals of gossip itself. Traditionally, anthropologists interpreting gossip have split themselves into two distinct camps. Gluckman (1963, 1968, 1971) views gossip as serving two functions: Boundary Maintenance and Conformity Enforcement. Gossip serves as a device for maintaining the social boundaries between in-group members and outsiders. Gossip reaffirms the norms and reasserts the values of that particular communication network. Thus being gossiped about is as much a sign of belonging to a particular group, as being gossiped with. It is better to be gossiped at or with, than to be totally ignored.

The second camp, developed in rebuttal by the Newfoundland "transactionalists" (Paine, 1967, 1968) describes the functions of gossip as: Information Management and Individual Self-Interest. Gossip is a purposive behavior in the communication process. It is an important way to obtain information about

another person, sometimes the only way. Gossip is also viewed as a manipulative strategy to forward one's self-interest. We gossip with the intention of arranging a constant flow of information towards ourselves. We give in order to receive.

Closely following the direction of Paine's camp are two other theories. Cox (1977) proposes that the primary function of gossiping is Impression-Management since gossip redefines the identity and status of the victim by the power of words. It interferes in another's impression-management as an act of social control to further one's personal gain, it acts to stigmatize the victim. Suls (1977) explains gossip in relation to Social Comparison Theory, and suggests that human beings gossip because they want to obtain information so as to compare their achievements with other individuals. Through this second-hand, informal communication, one can evaluate his/her abilities in a less painful and less embarrassing manner than in confronting the other person directly.

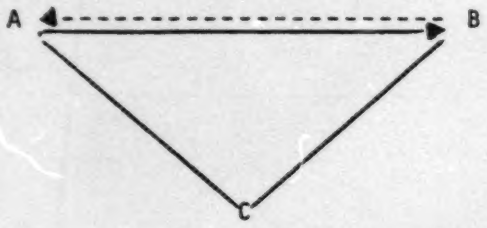
Lastly, Rosnow and Fine (1977) approach gossip in light of Social Exchange Theory. Their conceptualization of gossip falls into the gray area between the "functionalist" and the "transactionalist" approaches. For them, there are three main functions of gossip: "Informative Gossip" is the trading of information and provides the participants with a "cognitive map" of their environment; "Moralizing Gossip" is a manipulative device where one person attempts to "gain an

advantage over another"; and "Entertainment Gossip" is for the mutual recreation and fun of the performers, as in two people engaging in a casual verbal game. The authors also draw a parallel between the functions of gossip and its distributive pattern. "Informative Gossip" corresponds to a redistributive trading pattern; "Moralizing Gossip" conforms to an exchange pattern between interactants bargaining for psychological advantage or power; and gossip for mutual entertainment follows a typical reciprocative pattern.

In summary, gossip seems to serve diverse functions, depending on the different needs, wishes and expectations of the participants in different communication contexts. For example, it is norm-enforcing, and at the same time informative, to learn that professor so-and-so is being forced to resign because he has been discovered to be a homosexual. Such gossip reasserts the norms of a communication network, while at the same time it serves the function of impression management by changing the other person's impression. Further, it may provide a "cognitive map" for the dyads regarding what is sanctioned or forbidden in their social environment. Thus the "functionalist" approach and the "transactionalist" approach are best viewed as complementary approaches rather than competitive camps. With these various functions of gossip in mind, we can now explore the rules of gossip in dyadic communication.

RULES OF GOSSIP

In all cases below, person A and person B are the gossipers, and person C is the gossippee (the one being gossiped about). The relationship among the parties can be diagrammed as follows, where the arrows show the communicative exchange. A and B are involved in the communication process of gossiping about C.



The following rules are the necessary conditions of gossip, and if any one of them is not met, the resulting exchange does not constitute the process of gossiping.

RULE 1: When A and B gossip about C, C is not to be within listening distance of A and B.

This is the contextual rule for gossip. For example, take the situation where student A and student B are gossiping about Professor C who is reputed to exchange good grades for the sexual favors of his/her students. It is not gossip, if A declares to B, within the presence of C: "You know what, Professor C is real easy to please. All you need to do is to spend the night over at his/her house and you'll

get an A in return. I heard that's what D did." Student A is in this case, either performing a public degradation ceremony of C, or intentionally participating in sarcastic performance to ridicule Professor C, knowing full well that Professor C is close enough to overhear the remark. It may also be the case that student A is signalling willingness to play along with Professor C's game in a double entendré statement. Thus, it is gossip if A is disclosing this exclusive piece of information to B out of the presence of C. Otherwise, the exchange may take on the rituals of other speech acts within the listening distance of Professor C.

RULE 2: The exclusive information A imparts to B (or vice versa) is not public knowledge about C from either the perspective of gossiper A or B.

This is the content rule for gossip. For gossip to exist, the act of disclosure about C must lead to a new discovery from the viewpoint of either A or B. It is not gossip if A informs B that: "Professor C is a very serious hard-working scholar," which in reality is an established fact that the majority of students know. In this case, student A may be offering his/her opinion to student B about Professor C, rather than gossiping. However, if Professor C's public image is that of an upright, hardworking scholar, A will be gossiping if he/she says to B: "Guess what I've found out,

Professor C fools around with different students every night and gives them higher grades in return." Student A is disclosing this exclusive piece of information to student B, which without this process of gossiping, student B will not directly obtain from the public or from Professor C him/herself.

RULE 3: The information A or B transmits about person C is an entirely voluntary process.

This is the procedure rule for gossip. The condition for gossip to exist is that the decision to share information about C must be A or B's own free choice. He/she must not be bound by his/her status, occupation, situation, or relationship to disclose this piece of information on person C. For example, it is not gossip if a faculty committee is set up to investigate the grading fairness of Professor C, and students A and B testify against him/her. A and B have to cite evidence from Professor C's behavior to document their arguments, they are obligated by the situation to provide information on the private affairs or activities of Professor C. It is gossip if student A and student B are exchanging sexual anecdotes about Professor C when the situation does not call for the explicit exchange. Another example: the information that Professor C is divorced and adopting a child

is not gossip if two social-workers are assigned to investigate the case of child adoption. They are obligated by their roles to share this fact about Professor C. Whereas it is gossip if the same information about Professor C is being disclosed between neighbor A and neighbor B—both are engaging in an active voluntary process of gossiping.

RULE 4: The relationship between A and B must be comparatively closer than that to C.

This is the structural rule for gossip. There are two reasons behind this rule: First, if A gossips to B about C, A is aware that B shares certain moral assumptions with him/her over the behavior of C, thus they are reinforcing each other's values. Second, there is no point in A's gossiping to B about C if B and C are intimate friends. In the latter case, B should have the first-hand information directly from C rather than through A's gossip. Using the example from the previous three rules, gossip will not take place between student A and student B if A knows that B is the favorite student of Professor C and is having an affair with C. Upon receiving their grades, it is probably a ritual of ridicule or indirect questioning (depending on the paralinguistics) when student A says to student B: "Hey, I heard that Professor C is real easy to please. All you need to do is to stay overnight at his/her house in return for an A." In this case student A

may be teasing or provoking student B to anger, or A may be indirectly questioning B for verification, hence this is not gossip. Another explanation may be that A, knowing full well that B is a close friend of C, purposely made the statement about C to perform the speech act of slandering C, this is not gossip. Thus in gossip, the relationship between A and B must be comparatively closer than that to person C. We might inform, complain, advise or give opinions, but we seldom "gossip" about someone close to us, for example, our spouses, our parents, or our very closest friends.

To briefly summarize the rules of gossip: 1) When A and B gossip about C, C is not to be within listening distance of A and B; 2) the exclusive information A shares with B is not public knowledge about C; 3) gossip is an active voluntary process between the two participants; and 4) the relationship between A and B is comparatively closer than that to C. The first rule concerns the context of gossip. The second rule restrains the content of disclosure. The third rule focuses on the voluntary procedure of gossip, and the last rule delineates the structure of the relationship between the gossipers and the gossipee.

DISCUSSION

As Stewart (1972) indicates: "The forms and uses of

language are inexhaustibly flexible and various; speaking is not a game, but a whole family of games, and the rules for these games, the purposes and methods of play are almost endlessly diverse." Gossip is a cooperative game and like joking, takes place between individuals who stand in special relationship to each other.

In exploring the functions and the four rules of gossip, we gain a better understanding of what gossip is. The rules of gossip constrain what we may communicate, how we may share, and to whom we can exchange information about a third person. In our daily interaction with others, we are all able to perform communicative rituals like gossip on the basis of certain shared tacit knowledge, however we never openly articulate these underlying rules that guide our interpersonal behaviors. In exploring the functions and rules of gossip as part of everyday language, we gain a better understanding of the rules of conversational communication.

Returning briefly to the parallels between self-disclosure and gossip, Pearce and Sharp (1973) have presented five characteristics of self-disclosing communication: 1) relatively few communication transactions involve high levels of disclosure; 2) self-disclosure usually occurs in dyads; 3) self-disclosure is usually symmetrical; 4) self-disclosure usually occurs in the context of positive social relationships; and 5) self-disclosure usually occurs incrementally. If gossip

is viewed as the process of "third-disclosure," that is, disclosing information about a third party, the rituals of gossip can be compared to the five characteristics of self-disclosure as follows: 1) relatively few communication transactions involve high levels of third-disclosure. There are some few people who gossip all the time, but in general, high levels of third-disclosure are rare. 2) Like self-disclosure, gossip usually occurs in dyads. For example, in the case of student A gossiping to student B about Professor C's romantic affairs with other students, it is much "safer" and "wiser" to keep the "private" news between the pairs, because spreading information in a small group may involve higher risk. Also once this private piece of information becomes "public," it is no longer gossip. In gossip, the fewer witnesses, the better. 3) Similar to self-disclosure, gossip seems to operate in a symmetrical pattern. Gossipers often appear to sense a norm of reciprocity in trading information about a third party. For example, student A gossips to student B about Professor C's love affairs may be topped by B's exclusive knowledge of the list of students with whom Professor C has fooled around; or B could reciprocate information about another mutual friend whom both A and B know. Thus to a certain extent, gossip is a conversational game in which information is disclosed and reciprocated in dyads. 4) Parallel to self-disclosing communication, gossip also occurs in the context

of positive social relationships. Student A and student B gossiping about Professor C reinforce and reassert each other's values. That A and B share certain basic moral assumptions indicate that they must be in a positive social relationship to start with. It may be disastrous for student A to gossip to student D about Professor C, if D has a negative relationship with A; for D could use this opportunity to report back to Professor C and hence penalize A. 5) As in self-disclosure, gossip seems to occur incrementally in dyads. Once "trust" is established between student A and student B that they are both "reliable" or "trustworthy" enough not to report information back to Professor C, the gossip between A and B is likely to increase slowly and steadily.

In short, gossip, or the art of "third-disclosure," seems to closely parallel self-disclosing communication. The five characteristics of gossip mentioned above are based on observations by the author. Empirical research is needed to verify the similarities and differences between gossip and self-disclosure.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

A number of research questions that can be derived from the rules of gossip need to be further examined and explored if we want to fully understand gossip as a genre of informal communication.

RULE 1

If A and B are engaging in the process of gossiping about C, the sudden presence of person C within the listening distance of A and B will create a violation of the context rule. What are the verbal and nonverbal cues displayed by gossipers A and B with the sudden presence of C? What are the kinds of linguistic or nonverbal strategies used by A and B to incorporate person C into their new performance? What are the most likely speech acts that follow with this sudden violation of the context rule by gossipee C?

RULE 2

The content rule indicates that the information A shares with B in gossiping is not public knowledge about C. It seems that those who are in higher status than the gossipers, and those who self-disclose little, are the most likely persons to be gossiped about because information about them is scarce and therefore appears valuable. Research is needed to find out the differences between peer-group gossip (gossipee in same class as gossipers) and cross-status gossip (gossipee in different class from gossipers). Also, under what conditions is "positive gossip" more likely to happen? Under what situations is "negative gossip" more likely to take place? How does the communication context affect the content of gossiping?

RULE 3

The procedure rule requires that the information A or B shares about person C is an entirely voluntary process. What are the gratifications A and B receive in gossiping about C? In self-disclosing communication, there is a curvilinear relationship between self-disclosure and satisfaction in the maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Gilbert, 1976). Will the same relationship apply to gossip and interpersonal satisfaction? That is to say, is a moderate degree of gossip most conducive to interpersonal satisfaction, while low and high levels of gossip may interfere with relational satisfaction?

RULE 4

The structural rule of gossip requires that the relationship between A and B must be comparatively closer than that to C. Is it the case that the more A and B gossip about C, the more trust is established between A and B? Under what conditions is risk most likely to occur between A and B gossiping about person C? Where is the balance point in the trust-risk dilemma in which A and B mutually gossip about a third person?

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has reviewed the "functionalist" approach and the "transactionalist" approach to the functions of gossip,

and has delineated four rules of gossiping: the Contextual Rule, Content Rule, Procedure Rule, and Structural Rule. The rules constrain where gossip is to occur, what information is to be exchanged, how gossip is to be co ducted and the appropriate structural relationship in gossiping. The parallels between gossip and self-disclosure have been considered, but research is needed to test these observations. Finally, a set of research questions was derived from the rules of gossip that awaits further exploration.

In studying the rules of gossip, the nature of gossip as a communication construct becomes more clear. In everyday interpersonal communication, we joke, we question, we advise, we complain, we promise, we deceive, we self-disclose, and we gossip with one another. The rules of gossip constrain how, when, and where this particular communicative act is conducted, and provide us with a fuller understanding of what constitutes the process of gossiping. We all conduct our daily conversation with ease and smoothness, yet very little research has dealt with the tacit, fundamental process of informal interpersonal communication. In proposing these four rules of gossiping we come closer to understand how the shared tacit knowledge of the sender and the recipient guides and makes significant their communicative acts.

It is the hope of the author that communication researchers will continue to develop rules for different communicative

acts, for it is through different sets of rules that we gain sharper awareness of how the process of interpersonal communication works. In this paper, the rules of gossip lead directly to some of the rules for self-disclosure. In a forthcoming paper, the rules of self-disclosure will be explored and discussed at greater length. Gossip, as an information gathering and disclosing process, deserves much more attention than it has received in human communication research.

NOTE

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